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a resource  
guide for  
single parents



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Divorce ... single mother ... separation ... desertion ... death. These are difficult words, hard words that often mean a woman or man must raise a family alone.

Although each single-parent family is unique, they do face common problems. This booklet addresses some of these problems.

It contains suggestions from professionals in the business of helping single parents. But more important, it has advice from several men and women who are travelling the one-parent road. It must be stressed that these parents aren't heading problem families. All families have problems. They are, however, heading families with special needs.

They have helpful ideas because they are surviving the potholes and bumps that jostle all families — whether headed by one parent or two.

### **You're Not Alone**

The number of one-parent families is increasing. The census-takers say about one in ten families is headed by one parent — usually a widow or widower. Separated and divorced parents are next in order of frequency, with a number of fathers gaining custody of their children. And there's an increasing number of unwed mothers who decide to keep their children.

### **When You Blow Your Stack**

The first person to use the phrase 'drive you up the wall' must have just had a run-in with a terrible-two-or-ten-year-old, or a frustrating-five-or-fifteen-year-old.

Kids are remarkably inventive. They can be funny, sweet, loving, generous and kind. They can also be selfish, spiteful, demanding and frustrating.



When a family has two parents, mother and father can spell each other off when the going gets rough. They can discuss what restrictions to place on their child's behavior and what discipline to use. They can talk out their frustrations.

The single parent also needs a safety valve, someone to talk to or a chance to get away for a few hours. The importance of family, friends and single-parent organizations can't be overestimated.

When pressure builds, just one more tiny provocation may mean your child gets a solid slap — or something worse that causes injury. And it should be remembered that for some children, being screamed at is harder to take than being spanked.

Such incidents often end with the parent feeling guilty. It happens to all parents occasionally. There's information and advice in a free pamphlet available at the area children's services office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. It's called *Discipline* and is part of the Friendly, Fair and Firm series. (Area offices are listed on page 14 ).

### **Bringing Home the Bacon**

How much does it cost to raise a child to the age of 18? What about \$30,000? Or \$45,000? Or \$50,000? Who really knows? The people who bother with such arithmetic are still hunched over their calculators. But one thing is certain: Raising children costs plenty.

For the single parent — usually a woman — working outside the home may be the only way to make ends meet.

Does the family suffer? It's tough to answer. Factors such as the nature and age of the child, the mother's personality, her skills and her needs all form part of each individual picture.

Many women want to work outside the home. They feel restricted in the traditional homemaker's role and their frustration is felt by other family members. And it is believed that a mother's attitude about her job does have an effect. If she views her work as rewarding, it can be a plus factor in her child's development.

There are special concerns, however, when the child is less than 12 or 15 months old. Babies need a continuous supply of warm and loving care to develop into healthy individuals. In many cases it's mother who is usually best suited and best able to provide close, one-to-one attention although there appears to be no reason this nurturing can't be provided by another person with genuine feelings for the child. But whatever the source, it's essential the baby receive love and attention — and lots of it at this age.

The period from about 15 months to two years is also one of special concern. It's a time that's important for the building of relationships — especially between mother and child.

### **Financial Assistance**

There are a variety of assistance programs for mothers and fathers raising children. They include credit counselling, day-care assistance and other support and counselling services from government and private sources.

It should be noted, however, that fathers are generally not eligible for family benefits unless unemployable for medical reasons.

For more information contact your area office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Each office is equipped to find resources and answer your questions. Free booklets and pamphlets on day care, social assistance and child care topics are available.

## What Single Parents Say — The first weeks

Joan is a public relations officer for a large corporation. She's the sole support for her ten-year-old son and has been since her husband walked out five years ago.

Cecilia is a widow in her late forties. When her husband died suddenly five years ago, their house was paid for, but she had to get a job as a secretary to provide for three of her five children still living at home.

Single parents stress the importance of long talks with friends and family when separation or death comes.

Joan says when her husband left, she took plenty of time to talk the situation over with her son. Even the very young benefit from an honest explanation of why mommy or daddy won't be living at home any more. It's important the child understand that he or she isn't the cause of the breakup.

Lots of children have trouble over this point. They imagine that something they've said, done or thought about has caused the breakup. And the unwed mother must also make clear that the reason she didn't marry has nothing to do with her love for her child.

Cecilia says counselling from outside the family is important. When a mother or father dies, all the surviving family members need support. They need plenty of time and understanding to help them handle their deep sense of loss.

"You see, before I could start to look for a job, I had to handle my feelings," Cecilia said. "I needed a job for the money, and also to keep my mind busy, but I kept putting it off. I hadn't worked outside the home since I got married and was I nervous. Well, finally my son drove me to an interview and literally pushed me in the door."

"How did I cope? 'Cope' is such an inadequate word. I *survived* is more like it," Cecilia said.



“At first I was bitter! I’d look at some old derelict and think why is he still alive and my husband dead? Why is a good man with a family gone when a bum is still around?”

“But thinking back on it now, people were really wonderful. A neighbor would drop by and ask if I’d like to have coffee. You know they just dropped in because they were concerned. They wanted to help.”

“ I think it wouldn’t have been so bad if I’d had some warning. This way it was so sudden. I wasn’t prepared.”

### **Single Mothers**

Margaret was in her thirties and enjoying a successful career when she discovered she was pregnant. Marriage was out of the question. She considered abortion.

Then she began thinking about what it would be like to raise her own child. She talked it over with members of her family and with friends who encouraged her and promised to help with the baby.

Her daughter is now five. Margaret is very happy in her role as a working mother.

“If I were younger and had no job skills, I’m sure I would have had an abortion,” she said. “I was fortunate to be able to think things through and plan. I had positive feelings about becoming a parent.” Few people are as lucky as Margaret.

Here’s another example.

Judy was 18 years old when she became pregnant. She thought about abortion and then decided to put her baby up for adoption. But when her daughter arrived, she decided to keep her.

The father helped out financially until the baby was born. Then he left town and Judy hasn’t seen him since. She relies on government assistance and lives in a subsidized housing project. She needs lots of help.

## Staying Put

When marriage ends because of death or divorce, try not to move.

Says Joan: “Most people instinctively want to get away. But one upset at a time is enough to handle. The impulse is to flee to a safer climate, but the child involved needs as much stability as possible.”

Staying put is also important for the parent. Friends can provide help and support, whereas a move to a new town or city may mean nobody knows or cares about your problem.

## Caring for the Kids

Day care is a major and continuing concern for the single parent who works outside the home.

The solution may be day care in a private home, community centre, church or school. To locate day care, call your local municipal office or contact the closest area office of this ministry (page 14 ). Ask for a copy of the *Choosing Good Day Care* booklet. It's free.

Day nurseries are licensed, must meet basic standards and supervisory staff must have child guidance training. There are two categories of day nurseries; nursery schools and day care centres. Nursery schools provide half-day care. Day care centres provide full-day programs and serve a noon meal.

A third important source of day care is in private homes. Private-home day care can accommodate up to five children, according to provincial regulations. (Some municipalities restrict this to three youngsters.) Although private-homes are not licensed, in some areas of the province “supervised” private-home care may be available. Supervised homes are those approved by the municipality or a community agency.

Community information centres, churches, YM/YWCA, YM/YWHA or public health nurses may also have day care information. Ads for day care are often carried in local newspapers or on bulletin boards in supermarkets and coin laundromats.

Joan preferred day care in a home. She found a neighbor with youngsters who likes looking after children and who wanted to earn some money.

No matter what style of day care you choose, select three or four locations and check them out first. Visit when the children are up and around so you can see the range of activities offered. What do the parents using the service think? What do their children tell them?

### **Other Solutions**

Hire a housekeeper. This is viewed as a good solution for those who can afford it and who find the right person. It can be expensive, although the cost per child decreases with each additional child requiring day care.

### **Shared Accommodation**

Margaret's first move after her baby's birth was to a house rented by another single mother with two youngsters. Margaret says the companionship and affection shown her and the baby helped her over the transition from single person to single parent. And baby sitting duties could be shared.

But Margaret missed the privacy and convenience of her own bathroom, kitchen and living room. She moved out of this informal co-op after five months.

The next home was an apartment in a neighborhood which Margaret chose carefully. She wanted other children around her, so that she could continue to share baby sitting chores with other parents.

Margaret is an example of the independent new-style mother. She now has a long-term relationship with a man who treats her child as his own. Marriage? Margaret says no. She's happy this way and says her daughter is too.

## Friends and Relatives

Living with family or friends works for some. Its success hinges on the personalities of those involved. For example, some grandmothers don't want to be 'a mother to a child.' They may want to start living for themselves. Other grandmothers gladly look after grandchildren on a full-time basis.

Sandra is a secretary in her 20s with a seven-year-old boy. She's an unmarried mother and her parents supported her both financially and emotionally after the baby was born. She works outside the home and her mother looks after Sandra's son. He's thriving on the love and attention provided by the grandparents and by Sandra's younger brother and sister who also live at home.

Despite this, Sandra maintains she should have moved out after the first year.

"I'd like to raise my child my way", said Sandra. "I'd like the independence. But it wouldn't be fair to move out now. He likes it there too much."

Other mothers say moving in with friends or relatives is unthinkable. They also fear doting grandparents who may 'spoil' the child.

## The Parent Alone in a Two-Parent World

Here's a list of things that bother women when they first split with their husbands:

- Invitations to the homes of married friends end or become infrequent.
- Other wives often view the divorced woman as a huntress stalking their husbands.
- Some men view divorcees as easy sexual scores. After all, a divorcee is 'used to it' and isn't 'getting it now'.
- Their kids stop getting invitations to birthday parties.
- Some people think a recently separated woman shouldn't have a social life of her own. Neighbors gossip about her if male visitors drop in during the evening.



The examples seem extreme. But most have been experienced by divorcees and, to a lesser extent, by widows.

When invitations from married friends do arrive, there's usually an extra man or woman added to balance the male-female count.

"I hated that match-making", said Joan. "And it was uncomfortable visiting with couples that both my husband and I knew. They'd take sides in the divorce. Except for one or two old friends, my friends now are mainly single parents I've met since the divorce."

Single fathers and mothers often end memberships in organizations and clubs because of the couple-orientation.

Even normal neighborly chit-chat can be a strain for the single parent. A mother in a two-parent family is sometimes resentful of the single parent who dares to raise a child alone and manages well without the visible support of a spouse.

One unwed mother says she quit mentioning any of her child-rearing problems to a casual acquaintance.

"I couldn't stand the smug I-told-you-so gleam in her eye." But talking things over with a close friend helps a lot.

## **The Single Father**

Because most single parents are women, the bulk of research has to do with female heads of one-parent families. Family benefit legislation and court rulings in child custody cases tend to favor the mother as homemaker, although there are men who are winning sole custody or joint custody of their children.

Some fathers are pressing for change in these areas. They complain that the rights of fathers are being ignored. They argue that the mother-as-homemaker philosophy gives the wife the power to use the children as weapons. She can restrict the father's visiting rights. In some extreme cases fathers have 'kidnapped' their own children in retaliation. Child custody battles are very damaging to all concerned.

Single-parent organizations stress this: In the eyes of the children, both mother and father are parents forever. Divorced parents must try to avoid criticizing each other. Children may feel they have to take sides and this can do more damage than the divorce or separation itself.

## Loneliness

When death or divorce ends a marriage, the single parent often feels adrift and helpless. Life seems endless, unchanging and futile.

Those who've been there say their best advice is to keep busy. Outside interests such as work, hobbies, church activities or membership in a single-parent organization can help.

Joan pursued hobbies and spent lots of time with her five-year-old boy. "I stepped up activities with Pat. I'd always read to him and we spent a lot more time together."

When Cecilia's husband died, friends and her children helped her over those first months of grief.

"We kept busy redecorating the house," she said. "You'd be surprised how much work you can get done."

When the unmarried mother first brings her baby home, she may find her new status as mother means she has little in common with old friends. This results in long, lonely nights and a feeling of being trapped. Loneliness is a convincing argument for shared accommodation of some form.

## The Need for a Break

Whether the single parent works outside the home or not, he or she needs time for a social life. Mom is all dressed up for a night out and the baby sitter arrives. Her child begins to cry. Mom is torn between cancelling everything and staying home or leaving. But if she goes out, will her feelings of guilt ruin the evening? This, of course, also happens in two-parent families.

All children sometimes fear they are being deserted. A recent United States study investigated children of unwed mothers and children with two parents. The major difference discovered was that fear of separation was twice as frequent among children with one parent.

When fear of separation surfaces, parents should take lots of time to reassure their child they are just going out for the evening and that they'll be home soon. Then they should enjoy their night out. They deserve it. This way the child will learn to trust and enjoy other adults. For a child who is never left with others, the separation from family in an emergency can be a terrible trauma.

## The Dating Game

Some single parents feel they are pretty good parents but not so good at being a husband or wife. They stay single by choice.

Says Joan, a divorcee: "A lot of women go right back into another rotten marriage for security reasons. If I met the right man, I'd get married again. But I have a good job and I won't be forced into it."

Whether single parents are seeking a mate or not, dates are part of a normal social life. Everybody needs a break from the pressures of parenthood.

Don is in his early 30s. He's a single parent with a five-year-old son. He's attractive, earns a good living in a profession he enjoys and has a number of female friends.

Don used to combine Sunday afternoon outings with his son Benny and a date. The girl friends tended to overwhelm the boy with affection. They enjoyed playing mother for an afternoon and tried to impress Don.

But just when Benny got to know and like one 'mother', another would show up.

Don quit dating on his son's time when a counsellor pointed out how confused Benny was getting over the nature of the relationships.

The other extreme in dating can also create problems.

Helen kept her social life separate from her life at home with eight-year-old Stephen. Then she met 'The Right Man' and planned marriage.

Helen introduced her son to his new father and Stephen objected. The man and the boy had had no chance to know each other. It was obvious to Stephen that his Mom loved and admired the man. Stephen felt jealous, resentful and threatened. And Helen couldn't understand why Stephen didn't share her feelings.

The answer would seem to be to move slowly and spring no big surprises on the child.

## **Sex Roles**

As children grow physically and mentally, they need to know both men and women. In the two-parent family, they develop definitions of 'Man' and 'Woman' by watching the parents. Children learn best by example, by watching a model. They identify with somebody of the same sex. Family members, friends, teachers or social workers sometimes fill this role. Parents concerned about this should discuss it with a counsellor.

Joan's boy was five when she split with her husband. Her son knew what it was to have a father and feels the loss.

"I went out with several men over the years but nothing was that serious. He'd ask me if I was getting married again. I'd say "No" and he'd burst into tears."



“I think if he hadn’t known his father for so long, it wouldn’t be so hard.”

Joan’s former husband had dropped completely out of their life. She has tried to supply her son with adult male companionship by enrolling him in youth organizations and neighborhood sports.

This has met with mixed success. Her son now has a good relationship with his grandfather and spends many weekends with his grandparents.

### **Spoiling the Child**

Single parents often overcompensate because their child is fatherless or motherless. They fail to say “No” and stick to it. They are often overprotective.

They think because they are giving their all to their child, the child should love them totally in return. They forget the parent’s aim should be to raise an independent individual. Children do grow up. They do leave home. And life continues whether there’s one parent or two.

### **Problem Families?**

It’s sometimes thought that because families headed by one parent have problems, they must be problem families. This is nonsense. All families have problems, some great and some small. Here are some facts.

Children in two-parent families sometimes cry when parents go out at night and leave them with a baby sitter; they sometimes get into trouble with police; they sometimes have nightmares; and they sometimes throw tantrums or things like teddy bears and dinner plates.

Children with only one parent sometimes laugh and play happily; they sometimes eat their dinners ‘all up’; they sometimes win sports trophies; they sometimes do crafts for proud display on fridge doors and sometimes they like to sit on laps and be cuddled.

Of course all this also applies to kids with two parents.

That’s the point.

## **Ministry Area Offices**

### **Northern Region**

#### *Sudbury*

St. Andrew's Place  
8th Floor  
111 Larch St.  
Sudbury, Ont. P3E 4T5  
(705) 675-4544

#### *Thunder Bay*

710 Victoria Ave.  
Suite 301  
Thunder Bay, Ont.  
P7C 5P7  
(807) 475-1345

#### *Timmins*

11 Elm Street N.  
Ground Floor  
Timmins, Ontario  
P4N 6A3  
(705) 267-7901

### **Southeastern Region**

#### *Kingston*

1055 Princess St.  
Kingston, Ont. K7L 5T3  
(613) 549-6470

#### *Peterborough*

263½ George St. N.  
Peterborough, Ont.  
K9J 3G6  
(705) 743-1624

### **Central Region**

#### *Barrie*

70 Collier St.  
5th Floor  
Barrie, Ont. L4M 4Z2  
(705) 737-1311

#### *Toronto*

110 Eglinton Ave. W.  
5th Floor  
Toronto, Ont. M4R 2C9  
(416) 965-7863

### **Southwestern Region**

#### *Hamilton*

499 King St. East  
St. John's Place, 2nd Fl.  
Hamilton, Ont. L8N 1E1  
(416) 525-6431

#### *London*

IBM Bldg., 5th Fl.  
195 Dufferin Ave.  
London, Ont. N6A 1K7  
(519) 438-8387





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